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FILE ONLY

Ex-captive lands at Andrews, pleads, 'Let my brothers go!'

By Warren Strobel
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Declaring himself a "born-again American," television newsman Jeremy Levin stepped onto American soil yesterday for the first time since his gunpoint abduction on a street in west Beirut 11 months ago.

Breathless and often choking on his words, Mr. Levin, 52, thanked "a people and a government who value . . . one man's life." But his thanks were mingled with impassioned pleas for the release of four Americans still held captive in Lebanon.

Mr. Levin, a District of Columbia resident, was kidnapped March 7, 1984, on his way to work as Beirut bureau chief for Cable News Network.

He escaped Wednesday night in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley by squirming out of his chains, tying three blankets together and climbing down from the second story of a house where he had been held in solitary confinement, he said.

After an 11:54 a.m. touchdown, the freshly shaven newsman, clad in a brown sweater, slacks and a tartan scarf, stepped from a blue-and-white Air Force transport plane onto the bleak runway at Andrews Air Force Base.

As he stepped down, a group of family and friends cheered and waved yellow ribbons.

"He was amazing," said Sally Nevius who, with her husband, John, waited in line to greet their longtime friend and neighbor. "He recognized people. He remembered their names," she said.

"Except for being pale, he [looked] just fantastic," Mr. Nevius said.

Air Force doctors who examined Mr. Levin over the weekend found him "in satisfactory condition," but said he suffered "thorn puncture wounds to his feet during his escape and suffered mild malnutrition and some weight loss during his captivity."

After greeting well-wishers, CNN executives and Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam, Mr. Levin strode to a podium crowded with microphones to answer questions from reporters. Upon spotting a friend from CNN, he broke into a run and hugged the man.

Mr. Levin thanked those who helped him gain his freedom — he named President Reagan, Syrian President Hafez Assad and civil-rights leader Jesse Jackson — and said, "We must now be concerned with the four other Americans."

Missing and presumed kidnapped in Lebanon are William Buckley, a political officer at the U.S. Embassy; the Rev. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister; Peter Kilburn, a librarian at the American University of Beirut, and the Rev. Lawrence Jenco, a Roman Catholic priest who worked at a relief agency in Beirut.

"They're experiencing 24 hours a day the most agonizing sorrows of the heart," he said. "They must be found."

The Islamic Jihad (Holy War), which apparently abducted Mr. Levin, has said it is holding the four Americans.

"We can take heart from the fact that I'm still alive," Mr. Levin said. "I hope that my captors have basic human values. I appeal to those values now," he said, his voice rising to a tearful shout: "Let my brothers go!"

But an anonymous caller claiming to represent Islamic Holy War told the Associated Press on Saturday that it had sentenced one of the four to death. The call could not be verified, and the caller did not say which American had been marked for death.

The caller also said Mr. Levin was set free and did not escape.

The State Department says it has been pursuing the release of the Americans through discreet diplomacy.

After his remarks, Mr. Levin was shepherded into a limousine that sped away.

A CNN representative at the air base said Mr. Levin was going some place "private. He's not going home."

Nonetheless, at his residence in the 2900 block of 33rd Place NW, camera crews from local television stations and the networks awaited Mr. Levin's return.

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The front of the house was decorated with an American flag, a yellow ribbon was tied to a tree in the front yard, and another yellow ribbon adorned the railing of the steps leading up to the house. Neighbors hung a sign saying, "Welcome Home, Jerry."

A small busload of friends and relatives arrived at the house at about 1:30 p.m. They had been at the airport, they said, and had seen Mr. Levin. Where was Mr. Levin now? "He's here. I don't know where he is right this second," one passenger said.

After a while, the camera crews drifted away.

Mr. Levin's homecoming yesterday marked the end of a 13-month saga that began when he arrived in Lebanon in January 1984.

After his abduction, his wife Lucille returned to the United States and stayed with them, Mr. and Mrs. Nevius said. Although she kept quiet for awhile at the State Department's behest, Mrs. Levin eventually began to lobby for her husband's safe return. She traveled to Lebanon to secure her husband's release and argued for change in U.S.-Mideast relations.

After his escape, Mr. Levin surrendered to Syrian troops at Baalbek, Lebanon. The Syrian troops, who found him hiding under a truck "wild-eyed" and without identification, treated him "gently, kindly and courteously," he said.

Mr. Levin was then taken to Damascus, Syria, where he was handed over to U.S. Embassy officials Friday and flown to Wiesbaden, West Germany, for a reunion with his family. He left Rhine-Main air base in Frankfurt, West Germany, for Andrews Air Force Base yesterday morning.